



# THRIVING RURAL

DESIGN · PLANNING · INNOVATION



## **Farm Management Plan – *Harcourt Organic Farming Cooperative***

Danns rd  
Harcourt  
Victoria 3453

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## Property Summary

### Description of Intent

Harcourt Organic Food Cooperative (HOFC) is a collaboration of organic farmers working their own various agricultural enterprises on leased land under a single farm ownership in Harcourt. The farmers are all passionate about learning their craft, feeding their community, and making direct and meaningful connections with their customers, through short supply chain marketing models such as Community Supported Agriculture. The collective is conscious of landscape health and the local and global impact of their farming enterprises, as well as of each other. They work together to identify synergies and supports that make all their lives easier and their enterprises more productive and profitable.

Enterprises include The Orchard Keepers (Fruit) (looking for a farmer), Sellar Farmhouse Creamery (Cow's milk [www.sellardairy.com.au](http://www.sellardairy.com.au)) and Carr's Organic Fruit Tree Nursery (Fruit trees). Gung Hoe Growers (Vegetables) recently ceased operating and are no longer part of the Cooperative. The aim of HOFC is to make the farm as productive and profitable as possible with stacked, synergistic enterprises within a collaborative framework and the use of regenerative and organic principles. The Cooperative is open to expanding into other agricultural niches on the farm as the opportunity arises, limited only by the human and natural resources available. The land for these enterprises is leased from Katie and Hugh Finlay, who have owned and farmed the land for many years. They have an intergenerational family connection to the land. Their children are also connected to the farm and wish to maintain this familial connection.

This farm plan is a part of the 'Innovate to Regenerate' World Wildlife Fund grant program. This Farm plan delivers on many aspects of Objective 2, with key deliverables outlined below:

**Objective 2. Creation of whole Farm plan that maps how we further regenerate the land, speed up soil regeneration, connect with our environment, improve land capability, and cooperation between enterprises.**

Actions
2.1 Continue to develop Holistic Context Framework articulates overall vision for HOFC and includes 6 monthly review / check in plan
2.2 Capture process of a Co-op creating a Holistic Management plan for external audience (to share our process)
2.3 Farm implementation plan developed that meets the needs of all HOFC, all 5 businesses and landowners on how to regenerate this property
2.4 Soil health testing plan in place and mentoring from soil scientist
2.5 Establish a whole of farm plant biodiversity database
2.6 Workshop held on Indigenous history and land use as it relates to the farm
2.7 Workshops held on risks associated with farming in a changing climate including developing plans for fire, drought and flood
2.8 Create sharable resources created about whole farm planning for external audience / other farmers

A traditional farm plan captures the vision and intent of the farmer for the land over the timeframe of the plan (generally 10 years) with a view to beyond. However, the structure of the Cooperative



makes this approach difficult, as those individuals involved in farming the land will change over time. This will include not only different people and personalities, but most likely different enterprises over time. Given this fluid structure, this Farm Plan aims to give clear direction for land management, biodiversity enhancement and farm productivity through the development of a vision and ethos on which to centre decision making for the farm whilst maintaining flexibility and identifying opportunities for the collaborative to strengthen and grow. Seven priority actions have been included to direct efforts over the next five-year period.

### Description of the Farm Planning process

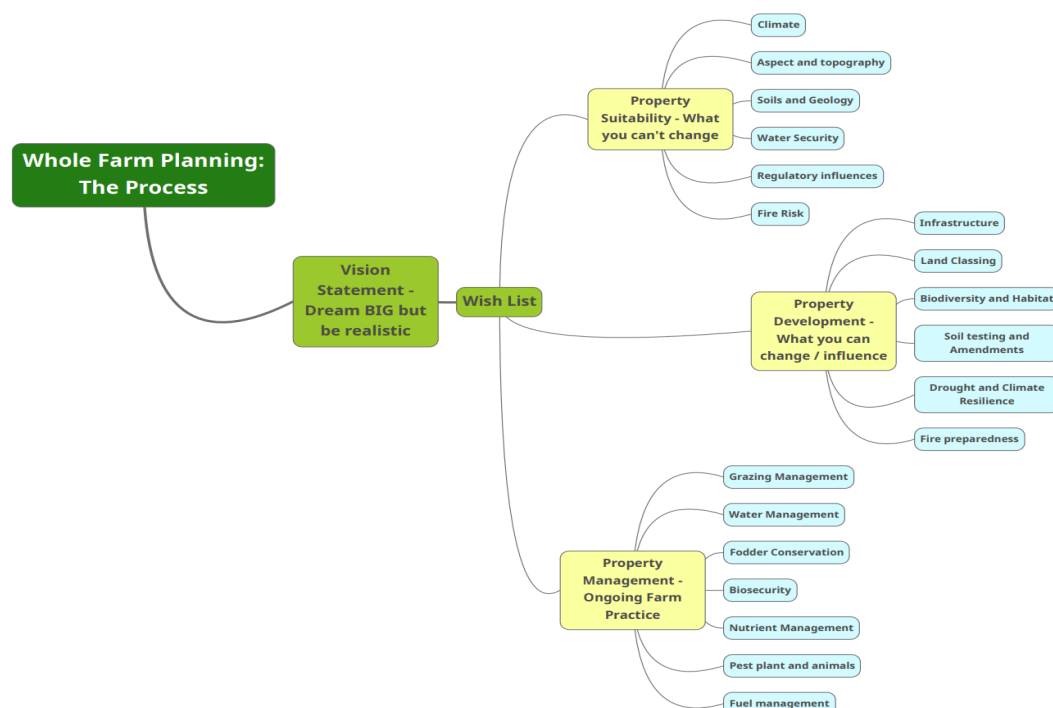
This farm plan was developed over a six-month period. The inception meeting between Harcourt Coop representatives, Katie and Hugh Finlay and Meg Roberts, and Annemaree Docking-Čehun of Thriving Rural in June 2023. This initial discussion included an introductory farm walk and discussion with the current farmers on the property.

This was then followed by two more on-farm workshops in October and November – the first a comprehensive farm walk covering the current enterprises, assets, soils and landscape attributes with the second a mapping and planning discussion discussing the possibilities and potential of the site. These invaluable workshops included Katie, Hugh, Tess Sellar, Meg Roberts and Annemaree, and were led by David Holmgren of Holmgren Design, co-ordinator of the Permaculture concept and author of many books on the subject. He brought a unique perspective to the discussions which prompted broader thinking about design and the potential uses and synergies on the farm which would utilise the landscape with a sustainable, regenerative approach to landscape management. These workshops were also filmed by Mitch Nivalis from MDP Photography.

These walks and workshops were supported by regular meetings between Katie, Meg and Annemaree to further investigate the finer details of property, its capacity, as well as the farmer / enterprise relationships. The summary of these extensive discussions has been collated by Annemaree and shaped into the plan as outlined in this document.

All Thriving Rural Farm Plans follow a systems thinking approach based on the framework illustrated in the diagram below.

Figure 1 Thriving Rural Whole Farm Planning Process



## Property Description

The traditional owners of the property are the Djaara Dja Dja Wurrung people. Their country extends as far west as Lake Buloke and the Richardson River and as far east as the Campaspe River. Boort is the northernmost town with the southern boundary just outside Ballarat near Creswick. The area includes the City of Greater Bendigo, as well as Daylesford, Maryborough, St Arnaud and Wedderburn. Initial contact with local representatives of the Djaara regarding this plan has been made. A workshop and engagement process will be undertaken in March 2024. This document will be updated to include further context from the local First Nations people once this process is complete.

The property at Danns rd, Harcourt was one of the earliest orchards in Harcourt, originally planted with fruit trees some 140 years ago. It is transected by the Harcourt Channel – a historical piece of infrastructure originally dating back to the 1880's. Built on the contour through the property to facilitate historic irrigation and water distribution through the district, the concrete channel has been decommissioned by Coliban Water for some years. However, the channel could offer an imaginative opportunity to manage water on the farm for pasture and crop production. Coliban Water have offered to remove and fill in the channel, however, given its heritage status and unique presence, the cooperative is eager to incorporate it into the farm design.

The property has been a part of Katie's family since her parents purchased the farm in 1971. Hugh and Katie then purchased the property in 1998. Since that time, they have farmed under the name of 'Mt Alexander Fruit Gardens', including the production and sale of organic fruit, fruit trees and offering U-pick opportunities to the public. It has also been their home, where they have raised their children and where they are part of the local community. Katie and Hugh's hope for the future is to retain their home, care for the property and generate a modest income from the site, while being able to retire from active farming life.

The property is located in the foothills of Mt Alexander, 2.5kms east of Harcourt, 10kms northeast of Castlemaine and 33kms south of Bendigo. It is 5 minutes off the Calder Freeway, offering excellent transport access to both Bendigo and Melbourne markets. Melbourne CBD is approximately 1.5 hours travel time. Castlemaine railway station, on the Melbourne - Bendigo line, is approximately a 10-minute drive from the farm. Hardwicks of Kyneton is the nearest abattoir, however the facility has recently stopped processing small numbers of animals, which may restrict the scope and variety of livestock based enterprises open to the Cooperative. Bendigo, Yea and Pakenham are the closest livestock saleyards / exchanges. The nearest poultry processor is Star Poultry, approximately 160kms away in Keysborough, southeast of Melbourne.

The farm is adjacent to the Mount Alexander Regional Park and the La Larr Ba Gauwa Park Mountain Bike trail park. Campbells Creek Plantation is located approximately 8 kms to the south, making the Coop location ideal for high impact biodiversity enhancement through extending and contributing to the linkage of these two local forests, strengthening the natural assets in the region. It is also ideal for biodiversity monitoring, which will be conducted by all coop members and volunteers as the opportunities arise. More detail about biodiversity monitoring will be included in Section, including a training program for all coop members and volunteers.

From the perspective of fire management of the farm, these forest locations should also be acknowledged as potential fire risks. The farm homestead as well as outbuildings are surrounded by managed landscape, including garden, orchard and market garden, including irrigation resources which can be adapted for firefighting. These areas are kept clear of fine fuels to mitigate fire risk. The Picnic Gully paddock to the northwest of the farm buildings is a primary risk to be managed due to



the upward slope leading to these key built assets and its historically heavy infestation of gorse and blackberry, both highly flammable plants in their own right and the presence of which makes fine fuel management difficult. Significant headway has been made in reducing this risk through ongoing weed and grazing management. The Harcourt channel has potential to further contribute to this effort through opportunistic irrigation increasing the perennial fodder values on this block and outcompeting these woody weeds.

The Strategic Biodiversity Values (SBV) of the block vary greatly, from a low score of 7 on the west to 75 on the eastern side adjacent to the forest. The Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVC) on the property are Grassy Woodland on the lower lying country and Granitic Hills Woodland in the higher.<sup>1</sup> Maps of the SBV's and EVC's are in Appendix Three and Four respectively, with vegetation profiles for the EVC's included in Appendix Eleven. Understanding the SBV's and EVC's of the property further enhance our understanding of the inherent values and capacity of the site, offering greater insight into management and integration of both cultivated and natural systems alike.

### The Coop

The Coop has been operational with the five different enterprises since 2018. The farmer tenure have ranged from 2-6 years, with some pre-dating the formation of the Coop. The intention has been young farmers get their start, hone their skills, and establish their businesses before moving onto their own or larger properties. The Cooperative is an excellent opportunity for aspiring young farmers with a few years working under their belt to take the first step into their own farming business without the prohibitive outlay of land purchase which is unattainable for many young people in the current market. However, to date, people and enterprise have left the farm or closed their businesses for a variety of reasons.

The orchard is currently being managed by Katie and Hugh with Gung Hoe growers ceasing their operation and lease at HOFC. The next 12 months will be formative for the Coop. This has renewed discussions about attracting the right people and enterprises to the Coop.

These discussions are also considering what security the farm needs to offer to attract and keep those farmers for a realistic length of time to build a solid foundation for the longevity of the collaboration. Ideas include support such as collaborative business and marketing structures, shared farm ownership and additional farmer housing on the property to reduce rent and commute expenses for the farmers. There are some examples of these models in Australia and overseas. All have their up and down sides, as outlined in Open Food Network report listed below.

### Description of neighbouring landholdings.

Harcourt is an internationally famous fruit growing region and HOFC is part of a strong orcharding community. The suitable country in the immediate locale is under intensive commercial fruit production. The landscape is fragmented into smaller blocks and farms, as is much of the farming land within commuting distance of Melbourne. Much of the local orcharding land is owned by two non-local corporate entities. Some properties in the more marginal soils of the region are used for grazing and less intensive farming pursuits. Historically, quarrying of granite has also been an important industry, with evidence of this extraction in the area, including on the 'Carpet Rock' section of the HOFC property, as well as the immediate neighbouring property to the north on Picnic Gully Rd.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://maps2.biodiversity.vic.gov.au/Html5viewer/index.html?viewer=NatureKit>

## Reviewed Documents

Documents supplied and reviewed by the author for this plan include the following:

- Harcourt Organic Farm Alliance Business Model (Sorted4Life 2017)
- Mt Alexander Fruit Gardens 5 Year Sustainability Plan 2008
- Grow Great Fruit & Mt Alexander Fruit Gardens Sustainability Plan 2014
- Mt Alexander Fruit Gardens Permaculture Plan 2009
- HOFA Fire Plan
- Collaborative Farming Models in the Australian Context Briefing Paper prepared for Harcourt Organic Farming Co-operative, June 2023. Open Food Network.
- Farm Mapping
- Soil testing 5/5/2023

## Property details

<b>Size of Property:</b>	38 Ha
<b>Catchment:</b>	North Central CMA
<b>Water Courses:</b>	Harcourt Channel
<b>Water Supply:</b>	Tanks, Dam pumping rights – commercial license 30 ML
<b>Services:</b>	Electricity (32 kW solar?)
<b>Improvements/Assets:</b>	Homestead and garden  Large dam – 15 ML storage, 30 ML annual water right  Smaller leaky dam – Carpet rock block  Irrigation infrastructure  Extensive shedding <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Packing shed</li><li>- Green house</li><li>- Shipping container</li><li>- Barn</li><li>- Composting toilets</li></ul> Orchard plantings ( – total area under orchard) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Cherries</li><li>- Plums</li><li>- Apples – heritage varieties</li><li>- Pears</li><li>- Apricots</li></ul> Fruit tree nursery  Market Garden (<1 Ha)  Bush foods production



	Kangaroo fencing (partial – eastern boundary between property and La Larr Barr Gauwa)
	Harcourt channel (decommissioned)
	Carpet rock bush block (≈ 6Ha)
<b>Planning Zone:</b>	Farm Zone
<b>Planning Overlays:</b>	Environmental Significance Overlay
	Heritage Overlay
	Bushfire Management Overlay (not directly affected but close by)
<b>Bioregion:</b>	Goldfields
<b>Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVC):</b>	Grassy Woodland
	Granitic Hills Woodland
<b>Land Degradation Hazard Region:</b>	Southern Plains and Hills.
<b>Land Class:</b>	Class 2,3 & 6 <sup>2</sup>

<b>Invasive Plants:</b>	Gorse
	Blackberry
<b>Invasive Animals:</b>	Kangaroos
	Rabbits ( <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> )
	Light occasional observation.
	Fox ( <i>Vulpes vulpes</i> )
	Seen in the area.
<b>Soil Type:</b>	Tenosols
	Granitic (Appendix Nine)

**Geology:** See map, Appendix Eight

Unit	Harcourt Granodiorite (G290): generic
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<sup>2</sup> Land classing kit for farmers

[https://vro.agriculture.vic.gov.au/dpi/vro/vrosite.nsf/pages/soil\\_health\\_land\\_class](https://vro.agriculture.vic.gov.au/dpi/vro/vrosite.nsf/pages/soil_health_land_class)

History	Late Devonian to Late Devonian (intrusion [process] - mid-crustal - continental crust - I-type)
Lithology	granodiorite (all)




Unit	granite-derived colluvium (Qc4): generic
History	Pleistocene to Holocene (sheet flow - colluvial)
Lithology	sand (all)

**Annual Rainfall:** 601.6 mm



## Climatic information:

Statistics provided by the Bureau of Meteorology for Castlemaine Prison<sup>3</sup>. It should be noted that due to location, climatic changes and seasonal variability, average rainfall figures may vary on this site to that stated in weather station data. An ongoing local record of weather observations on farm is encouraged.

Statistics	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Annual	Years	Plot Map
Temperature															
Mean maximum temperature (°C)	28.3	28.2	24.7	20.1	15.8	12.7	11.8	13.2	15.8	19.4	22.7	25.6	19.9	52	1966 2023 
Mean minimum temperature (°C)	13.2	13.5	11.0	7.7	5.4	3.6	3.0	3.6	5.1	6.8	9.3	11.0	7.8	52	1966 2023 
Rainfall															
Mean rainfall (mm)	40.8	35.3	35.8	42.5	57.0	57.1	59.3	65.4	60.2	59.0	48.8	40.1	601.6	57	1966 2023 
Decile 5 (median) rainfall (mm)	33.3	22.0	28.2	33.7	46.3	53.8	57.7	66.6	50.8	48.7	41.8	33.4	611.0	57	1966 2023 
Mean number of days of rain ≥ 1 mm	4.2	3.5	4.5	5.6	8.1	9.5	11.4	11.1	9.2	8.1	6.6	5.2	87.0	58	1966 2023 
Other daily elements															
Mean daily sunshine (hours)															
Mean number of clear days	11.2	11.1	10.4	9.0	5.3	3.8	4.0	4.5	4.5	6.5	6.7	8.5	85.5	42	1966 2010 
Mean number of cloudy days	8.2	6.0	8.7	10.5	14.5	16.1	18.0	16.3	15.1	13.3	11.4	10.6	148.7	42	1966 2010 
9 am conditions															
Mean 9am temperature (°C)	18.3	18.2	16.0	12.7	9.1	6.3	5.6	7.1	9.8	13.0	14.9	16.8	12.3	42	1966 2010 
Mean 9am relative humidity (%)	64	67	71	74	85	89	89	84	77	69	66	63	75	23	1986 2010 
Mean 9am wind speed (km/h)	9.8	9.0	8.3	6.9	5.6	5.0	5.4	6.7	8.4	9.4	9.7	10.1	7.9	40	1966 2010 
9am wind speed vs direction plot															
3 pm conditions															
Mean 3pm temperature (°C)	26.1	26.7	23.4	19.1	14.8	11.8	10.9	12.3	14.5	17.9	21.2	23.7	18.5	42	1966 2010 
Mean 3pm relative humidity (%)	39	39	42	49	62	69	69	63	58	51	45	41	52	23	1986 2010 
Mean 3pm wind speed (km/h)	13.5	13.0	12.2	11.2	10.0	9.3	10.1	11.3	12.4	12.2	13.0	13.4	11.8	39	1966 2010 
3pm wind speed vs direction plot															

red = highest value blue = lowest value

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Meteorology Climate Data [http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/averages/tables/cw\\_088110.shtml](http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/averages/tables/cw_088110.shtml)

## Vision for the future farm

HOFC aims, through the further development of their collaborative business model and regenerative farming system, to:

- grow healthy, organic food for the community,
- generate a comfortable living and fulfilling lifestyle for the group who own and/or farm the land,
- create a group of farming companions that are truly innovative and reciprocal, exploiting synergies for success, respectful of their own and the land's limitations yet ambitious for themselves, their business and those of their colleagues,
- capitalise on, appreciate, and restore the natural agricultural and biodiversity assets on the farm, including enhancing soil health including both soil and terrestrial carbon,
- investigate, experiment with and be an example of a collaborative business and farming collective offering alternative land access options in a high value land market for younger farmers whilst harnessing the true agricultural potential of the land through the stacking of compatible, diverse and symbiotic regenerative farming enterprises,
- offer security of tenure and the opportunity for financial return to both farmers and current property holders alike.

### Potential agricultural niches

“Ecological niche is a term for the position of a species within an ecosystem, describing both the range of conditions necessary for persistence of the species, and its ecological role in the ecosystem”<sup>4</sup>.

Similar to the concept of an ecological niche, an agricultural niche is an enterprise on the farm that produces food for the community and fits into the range of conditions offered within the landscape while contributing to the farms environmental, social and ecological health.

Previous work conducted by Sorted4Life identified a range of possibilities for potential agricultural niches, including:

#### Potential new crops/products:

- Organic cider
- Organic juice
- Berries
- Dried fruit/vegetables
- Citrus
- Avocados
- Nuts
- Wine grapes
- Eating grapes
- Herbs – medicinal / culinary
- Seedlings
- Mushrooms
- Honey
- Vegetables
- Flowers

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<sup>4</sup> Fath et al. (2019) *Encyclopedia of Ecology* Elsevier B.V.

#### Potential new enterprises:

- Poultry (eggs, meat)
- Pigs/sheep
- Compost
- Worms
- Veal/beef

#### Potential new products (non-farming):

- Workshops
- Accredited courses (via Bendigo TAFE/Kangan Institute)
- Farm tours
- Tourism – u-pick, camping, farming experiences

#### Potential relationships with people/community partnerships:

- Traineeships/interns
- Growing Abundance (skills workshops for Harvest volunteers)

The property is theoretically suited to an enormous range of possible enterprises and products given the natural and built assets available. There are some natural and practical limitations, including profitability, labour requirements, land size, infrastructure needs, soil constraints, climate, and market access. These practical considerations can be assessed on an enterprise-by-enterprise basis, with preference given to those who best complement the existing infrastructure and working assets of the cooperative. Some of these farming possibilities are described above but the real constraint is finding the right people who want to work the business.

There are key tenets relating to collaboration, ethical outlook and farming practice that must be adhered to by anyone interested in working the farm. To assist with assessing either potential initiatives or new farmers for existing enterprises, these tenets have been outlined in the following section.

### Key Tenets of the HOFC

The following seven tenets express the ethics and ethos of the HOFC collective. These tenets profile the culture that the group aims to foster on the farm and project into their markets and community. They can be used by HOFC as an assessment criterion for new farmer applications to the collective. Any new enterprise proposal or new farmer candidate can use these tenets as a guide to their application process and to decide if the group is the right place for them and their farming idea. They should be included in any prospectus developed and released.

#### *#1 Bring a Collaborative Spirit*

- Be a team player,
- Share meals and contribute to the table,
- Look for systems, synergies and complementarities that facilitate the whole,
- Be reciprocal and mindful in your relationships,
- Bring an entrepreneurial mindset and stay curious to foster innovation,
- Failure is a part of farming and the learning process. Be kind.
- Be respectful, gentle and encouraging with each other.

#### *#2 Apply Regenerative Organic and Biological Farming Principles*

- No artificial chemicals are to be used on the land,



- Where practical, Organic practices should be followed, and where a lease requires certification that certification is sought and maintained,
- Fit for purpose regenerative and biological farming practices must be adhered to,
- Further education, skill development and capacity building are encouraged.

### *#3 Highest Possible Animal Welfare*

- Kindness is the essence of all livestock farming,
- The fundamental nature of the animal and their relationships will be respected,
- Low stress stock handling will be utilised in all animal management processes,
- Harvest, if well managed, does not have to be a cruel process.

### *#4 Biodiversity protection and enhancement*

- Biodiversity in this report encompasses both the native ecosystem and the introduced agrobiodiversity, as outlined in the Biodiversity White Paper prepared for this project,
- Biodiversity will be protected and enhanced through respect for natural systems in farming practice, as well as through the development of diverse farming systems,
- Biodiversity will be observed, learned from and, where practical, documented by all on the property via iNaturalist.

### *#5 Soil protection and enhancement*

- Ground cover will be maintained at all times,
- Diversity above ground will support diversity below. Foster it wherever possible,
- Regular soil monitoring will be practiced in all enterprises (unless not actively utilising soil),
- Water movement on the farm will be understood, slowed through the landscape, directed towards best use and retained within the farming system where possible,
- Soil carbon will be enhanced in all systems,

### *#6 Adherence to legal requirements and general good governance in business*

- All farming enterprises within HOFC will maintain good governance structures, including current insurances, meet applicable tax obligations etc.
- The governance of the collective will be respected,
- Employment by any HOFC enterprise is subject to the relevant awards and conditions,
- A range of legislation may be applicable to different enterprises. Compliance is the responsibility of the individual businesses,
- It is acknowledged that a breach by one places the collective at risk.

### *#7 Transparency and honesty in all dealings – with each other and our customers/community*

- All HOFC members demonstrate a commitment to strong and healthy relationships within HOFC
- Uphold the ideals of the HOFC collective both publicly and privately.

## Priority Actions

A number of actions, ideas, possibilities, thoughts and projects were proposed during the lengthy discussions with the HOFC group. There are yet more possibilities outlined in the additional documents reviewed for the preparation of this plan. Not all have been included in this action plan. Instead, we have focused on five high priority actions for the HOFC over the next 5 years. These are agreed as the ideas with the most potential for impact for the collective.

This does not mean that other projects must be forsaken during this time. Indeed, the structure used to outline these priorities can be used by the group for any project arising as a quick and easy way to draw up a project brief and keep it on track. However, it should be acknowledged that time, money, human and other resources are limited and, as such, any project proposals should be considered against these priority actions. Using the Eisenhower Matrix may assist on decision making on where to place these resources.



Figure 2 Eisenhower matrix

### #1 Attract new players to the HOFC collective.

#### Why?

With the transitioning out of the Gung Hoe Growers and the current farmer-free status of the orchard, finding people who would like to run businesses like this is priority #1 for the HOFC collective. These two positions capitalise on clear assets already established on the property (market garden and orchard) and are discrete enterprises that have ready local markets. Filling these roles will therefore play to strengths of the group.

This process will take some time and thought, but if done well, it does offer the group an ideal opportunity to open the offering up to all farming applicants and proposals with the possibility of attracting additional farmers and business pitches beyond these two positions that require immediate filling.

#### How?

Given the unique opportunity offered and the need to attract dynamic participants to the group, drawing enough applications to offer choice is imperative. A professional, targeted prospectus for a broad distribution is required. This prospectus can be readily pulled together using this Farm Plan document as a basis.

Potential distribution networks include:

- ✓ HOFC customer / client base

- ✓ HOFC markets, social media and other established marketing avenues, such as blogs and newsletters,
- ✓ Young Farmers Connect,
- ✓ the MFM group,
- ✓ Victorian and Australian Farmers Market Associations,
- ✓ organic, biological and biodynamic farming associations such as ORICOOP,
- ✓ word of mouth

#### *Who?*

Katie and Hugh will lead this project with the support of the HOFC.

#### *When?*

This process should commence in March 2024.

#### *Milestones*



## *#2 Collective and farm legal structure decision.*

#### *Why?*

There has been extensive research and discussion of the appropriate structure for the HOFC. Currently operating on lease agreements, there are a range of possibilities, including collective ownership, body corporate structures and others. The Collaborative Land Ownership Briefing Paper prepared by the Open Food Network has investigated multiple possibilities and the Katie and Hugh have undertaken additional independent research into other associated opportunities. Other avenues of investigation may include the body corporate farm, Lyndale Park in Tallarook, the collectively owned property, Commonground in Seymour, or the more traditional farm hand accommodation offered at large horse stud facilities such as Swettenham Stud in Mitchellstown, near Nagambie.

Housing is a serious consideration for the viability of the collective. Building additional accommodation on the farm requires significant investment. Without the assurance of a return on investment through rent, lease or other income, the current property owners are reluctant to invest the required resources. Without the assurance of land ownership, any farmer collective member is also similarly reluctant. There are also regulatory barriers to building multiple dwellings on the acreage that will need to be considered.

There is some difficulty in making a decision in this regard as it is somewhat a ‘chicken and egg’ question. What legal structure is best will depend to an extent on those farmers attracted to the collective. Do they have a longer-term commitment, means to buy into the property and wish to build a home? Or is it a place to cut their teeth in farming business and then move onto their own home farm if their venture is a success? Or would Katie and Hugh, in taking this bold step, making a

decision and commencing the hard work of establishing governance structures, legal frameworks and administrative arrangements, offer a more tangible, saleable opportunity and security to attract new serious players to the group? It is hard to say.

#### How?

As a starting point, a group discussion (possibly mediated?) could be arranged for a full and frank disclosure of the incumbent farmers future aspirations for the property and their farming businesses. This may offer an immediate clear direction for progress based on the other reporting and research to date. If a clear direction is not evident, then a decision can be made for Katie and Hugh to progress an independent decision, or they can delay the decision until after the completion of Priority Action #1 and act in collaboration with the newly appointed farmers.

It should be mentioned that Katie and Hugh currently own the farm under a traditional freehold structure. They also have children with an intergenerational connection to, and interest in the property. Any discussions regarding the future of the farm will also include this broader Finlay family.

#### Who?

This process will be directed by Katie and Hugh with contribution from farmers and family. This priority action could benefit from independence guidance and support to mediate discussions, outline the step-by-step processes to establish the legal framework options, as well as profile the risks and benefits of any choice.

#### When?

The proposed group discussion could be completed early in 2024. Next steps will be dependant on the outcome of those discussions.

#### Milestones



### #3 Support Djaara leadership and management at Leanganook

As a result of the workshop, some key immediate actions emerged for HOFC to incorporate allyship and solidarity with Djaara into our practice. They are:

- **Use HOFC public profile to support Djaara aspirations for management of Leanganook.** This could take the form of an updated Acknowledgement of Country to be used in public, on tours and on our website. Suggested wording as follows:

*We acknowledge that we live and farm on Djaara country, and that sovereignty on this land has not been ceded. We pay our respects to the Dja Dja Wurrung people as the traditional custodians of this land, and to their Elders past, present and emerging. In particular, we acknowledge the enduring spiritual significance of this place, Leanganook, to the Dja Dja Wurrung people. We are grateful to Djaara for their leadership and commit to working towards Djaara management of Leanganook.*

*In solidarity, we also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout so-called Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their*



*Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.*

*We would also like to acknowledge the generous contribution of First Nations people to the Harcourt Organic Farming Co-operative. First Nations Sovereignty, healthy country and healthy food systems are inextricably connected and we will continue to strive to reinforce and strengthen this connection.*

- **Act as a conduit to the Djaara website and resources**
  - Link to Djaara pages on our website
  - Display Djaara resources (e.g. Galk Galk Dhelkunya Dja document in our farm shop)
  - Link to Djaara pages and other local orgs like Nalderun in our email comms
- **Seek out, promote, and avail ourselves of opportunities for further cultural awareness learning opportunities (Uncle Rick's tours, Bendigo tours, course that's run in castlemaine, exhibitions etc)**
- **Allow time and patience for pace of collaboration** - good things take time, and it's important to value the cultural importance of taking things slowly.
- **Continue taking steps to encourage use of land at HOFC for cultural purposes**, building on relationships formed with Djaara.
  - Be the people to reach out to contacts at Djaara (due to their limited resources and time) to offer space for cultural use of this land.

In the medium to long term, other actions that could be taken by HOFC & members can include:

- **Ensure all future funding proposals incorporate resourcing for working with Djaara and other First Nations people**, along with continuing to Pay the Rent.
- We might not know how to get there right now, but we hope that some of the above actions would mean that one day, **we see emus return to Leanganook.**

*Why?*

On 14th March 2024, Djaara (Formerly Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Clans Corporation) was funded to run a full day workshop on the farm. The purpose of the workshop was two-fold - first, to ensure any future plans for HOFC & the farm had the best possible historical understanding of Djaara culture & history and; second, to establish relationships and foundations for ongoing collaboration with Djaara on the farm.

In attendance were:

- From Djaara: Paul & Kyrin (Dumawal team), Harley Douglas (Program Manager *Galkangu* - Joint management) & Oli Moraes (Project Manager *Galk-Galk Dhelkunya* - Forest Gardening)
- HOFC staff and volunteers: 8 people
- Other groups (Grow Local & Tumpinyeri Growers): 6 people

From Djaara, Dumawal staff Paul & Kyrin conducted Tanderrum (Welcome to Country) followed by a cultural competency session which gave an overview of Djaara culture & history, exploring the ongoing impacts of colonisations and Djaara aspirations for the future. Attendees were encouraged to ask questions and have dialogue about good ways to work on this country, including better understanding cultural heritage, how to approach Djaara. The group then walked on the farm and discussed *Galkangu* and *Galk-Galk Dhelkunya*, with a particular focus on Djaara aspirations for how Leanganook could be managed in the future and how HOFC might support those aspirations. This workshop laid the foundation for better relationships with Djaara, along with the possibility of further collaboration and ideas for cultural uses of the land at HOFC (e.g. gathering of cultural resources, cultural burning practices).

The approach to managing country shared by Djaara was inspiring and galvanising for the whole group. It's clear from reflections following the day that there will be ongoing impacts to how we see our relationship to this land and to Djaara as the role of HOFC evolves.

#### *#4 Perennial pastures and fodder trees*

##### *Why?*

Historically the farm has focused on horticultural production with little support given to pastures. Prior to Tess Sellar taking over the grazing management of the property for her mobile dairy operation, the pastures were largely set stocked primarily for fuel reduction rather than livestock productivity and soil health. The granitic soils are not robust under such treatment and, as a result, the current ground cover is predominantly annual grasses and broadleaf plants with limited grazing value. These annual grasses also die back in hot summers and do not hold up under grazing pressure with slower growth rates in winter. The result is bare ground, lack of feed for livestock and soils without the protection and structure provided by perennial root systems.

Increasing the prevalence of perennial grasses, plants and fodder trees will support a healthy soil microbiome, and improve carbon sequestration, water holding capacity and productivity. Access to well-established perennial pastures and fodder trees will improve animal health and productivity, as well as profitability of any livestock enterprise on the farm, reducing reliance on imported feed. It will reduce water and wind speeds moving across the soils, which will improve water infiltration, lengthen the growing season, improve drought resilience and reduce soil loss to erosion.

### How?

Tess has made significant headway into improving the grazing management of the property. Under her management, the farm has been broken up into separate land class based paddocks for high rate rotational grazing with lengthy recovery periods, annual and perennial cover crops have been introduced and fodder trees have been planted. Improvements have been notable during Tess's tenure, with increasing carrying capacity, plant diversity and soil health. These changes do take time and a few turns of seasons to take full effect. It is difficult for the author to fully appreciate the landscape improvements to date without having inspected the property previously, however impacts of the change of management are evident and taking hold.

Concentrating on renewing the locally indigenous grasses suited to growing in the farms soils and climatic conditions would be valuable. Native grass seed is extremely expensive and hard to establish, however once established to provide a reliant pasture base. If a reliable source of native grass hay could be sourced, strategic intensive bale grazing with the dairy cattle could be utilised to reintroduce these species to the property at a lower cost to seeding. This proposition is complicated by the need for any feed imported to the property or fed to the cattle requiring organic certification to respect the farm and enterprises organic status.

If this is not possible, alternative non-indigenous improved perennial species could be introduced as a pasture base. Speaking with a local agronomist to assist in this would be advised to select species that perform well in the region, but options to consider could be perennial ryegrass, phalaris, cocksfoot, perennial fescues, prairie grasses and bromes. Legumes should also be included to improve nitrogen fixation. These may be established in a similar bale grazing approach, or direct seeded under the advice of an experienced agronomist.

Fodder trees offer an excellent resource alongside these perennial pastures. The Carpet Rock and Picnic Gully paddocks as well as the Gully paddock offer excellent opportunity in this regard as their soils and topography are more suited to trees and shrubs than pasture production. Traditional species of fodder trees include willow, poplar, tagasaste, oak, elm, ash and various acacias. Selection of fodder trees should be based on the cultural considerations of the location, as well as the management and labour requirement. Some fodder tree species can also be flammable, so fire risk to farm assets and safe zones on the farm should also be considered, whilst those with lower flammability, such as the deciduous species, can be used to reduce fire risk.

While being an excellent resource for livestock production, the attributes for their success, resilience and persistence as fodder trees can also make them prone to becoming weedy if the conditions are favourable, the plants are not utilised and reproduction and recruitment is allowed unchecked. Willows, for example, are illegal to sell or plant Australia, with the exception of *Salix babylonica* (Weeping Willow), *Salix calodendron* and *Salix richardii* (both sub-species of Pussy Willow)<sup>5</sup>. However, if the plants are to be utilised and managed as an asset in a grazing/browsing system, their weediness will be contained through this use and management. This can be either for direct grazing in rotation with suitable recover periods, similar to pasture rotations, or through 'chop and drop' systems, where the trees themselves are protected from livestock and prunings are offered to closely located stock to minimise any transport required. Depending on species, these groves can also be pollarded or coppiced to maintain palatability. They can also offer further resources beyond fodder, such as firewood.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://riversofcarbon.org.au/resources/willows-willow-management/>

Given the potential non-permanent nature of the farming enterprises on the property and considering Katie and Hugh's personal farming preference for horticultural systems rather than livestock-based production, the planting of fodder trees and creation of a potential weed problem for the property owners if the livestock consumption and management of the plants was removed should also be considered as a risk when assessing species, location and numbers. An exit strategy for their removal may need to be contemplated if the current livestock enterprise moves on from the property and no replacement takes over the opportunity. Whatever the approach, it should be determined in collaboration with the collective and all impacted should be in agreement prior to proceeding with these plantings.

It should also be noted that some livestock are harder on fodder trees than others. Goats in particular benefit greatly from access to browse as they naturally prefer browsing to grazing. However, given a choice, they will overgraze trees and leave grass in the same paddock untouched. They also have a strong taste for the bark of certain tree varieties and can ring bark and kill well established trees if they are not protected. The design of fodder tree management that allows for this difference in livestock species impact will create the most resilient and beneficial asset to the farm for the longer term.

#### *Who?*

Sellar's dairy is the key enterprise utilising this resource at this stage in the cooperative. Tess is taking the lead on this work.

#### *When?*

This work will be ongoing over many years. It will be a case of experimenting and discovering what works best through a process of continuous improvement. Tess has already made a significant investment of time and resources. Next steps for this action would be sourcing native perennial hay and/or investigating non-native options as well as planning next seasons fodder tree planting for August / September, depending on seasonal conditions.

#### *Milestones*



### *#5 Moving Resource Storage Site*

#### *Why?*

The current resource storage site of the farm is located adjacent to the market garden and east of the old barn and homestead. It is close to the head of Picnic Gully but on the southwestern side of the channel.

There is a range of materials and equipment gathered in this area that has accumulated over a couple of generations living on the property. Its proximity to the old barn and homestead would have made sense historically but less so now. It is an area with good soils and is prone to waterlogging in wet years. A more logical location now would be on higher, less potentially productive ground adjacent to the common workspaces to the north or west of the Wedgie shed.

This project would be a low cost but high time commitment action for the farm. It would allow the opportunity to sort out what resources should be kept and stored, whether outdoor storage is most appropriate for the resources long term viability as well as materials that should be sold on or discarded. Placing the store in a drier location will allow better access to these resources in wet years. It will free up an area of good soils for other uses and will allow better maintenance of a part of the property that links the risk of Picnic Gully leading a fire from the northwest to the homestead.

#### *How?*

This project is potentially quite overwhelming as it is a big job that requires many small decisions to be made. Decide on a location and set aside regular, short time slots to work on the store. Essentially – Marie Kondo<sup>6</sup> the store! If something is useful or brings you joy – keep it. Create three ‘piles’ – one for keeping (new store location), one for selling, rehoming or recycling (near the main driveway) and one for discarding (hire a skip). Anything you cannot decide on, set aside and come back to it later.

#### *Who?*

This is probably a job best tackled by the family, as there will be both useful, less useful and sentimental items to work through. This is unless there are parts of the store for equipment and materials owned by any of the enterprises. If this is the case, the respective enterprise managers should be responsible for sorting their own kit. Consideration should be given to the new storage space for allocation of enterprise space – as every farmer needs a farm store!

#### *When?*

These projects can be overwhelming and intimidating. Bite size pieces make it easier but do commit to a timeframe to ensure it does actually happen.

#### *Milestones*



### *#6 Ongoing biodiversity monitoring on the farm*

#### *Why?*

One of the actions of the WWF grant this project has been funded by is “Establish a whole of farm plant biodiversity database”.

Although the retention and expansion of farm biodiversity has always been a focus of the management methodology for Katie and Hugh, and more recently of the Coop, this action has highlighted to the group the importance and benefits of ongoing monitoring of biodiversity for the understanding of the landscape, the impacts of management actions, climate influences and the resilience of the property over time. Using a readily available online application can make this process accessible to all Cooperative members, volunteers, customers, visitors and participants of any form. Such a monitoring project would also contribute to the greater knowledge of biodiversity in the region and promote the use of the application, empowering individuals to contribute to this collective knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://konmari.com/about-marie-kondo/>

### How?

The author is aware of two citizen science applications that would suit the purpose of monitoring this project. They are NatureShare (a more local application) and iNaturalist (an international application). Both apps are freely available for anyone to sign up and record an observation through the uploading of a photo, the identification of which are then verified by the community. These photographs are geocached to verify location and are mapped accordingly. They allow the creation of projects and upload all observations periodically to the Atlas of Living Australia, contributing to the greater knowledge of biodiversity distribution and adaptation more broadly.

Firstly – a decision needs to be made about which application to use. Once this decision is made, upskilling the Coop members and volunteers could be facilitated through a workshop. Promotion of the monitoring could be promoted through signage to remind people to record their observations as well as let visitors know about the project and allow them to contribute if they wish.

Many people start recording observations and find it a very gratifying experience, as it expands their own knowledge of the landscape and species within it as well as making a meaningful contribution to the greater understanding of our natural world.

### Who?

Everyone!

### When?

This is a readily actioned project that could be actioned before June 2024.

### Milestones



## #7 Gully rehabilitation and repurposing Harcourt Channel

### Why?

The Harcourt Channel, as described earlier in the document, is the decommissioned concrete irrigation channel that divides the HOFC property. It is a dominant feature in the landscape that currently gets limited use on the farm but given its heritage status as well as it being on the contour through the farm, it could be a valuable asset to the property again for water movement and water storage.

The channel links the high-water flow area in the Gully paddock to the drier and more marginal soils of the Old Plum block and Picnic Gully paddocks.

### How?

This gully captures water from a large catchment, as well as having a small dam at its head for storage which currently overflows into the gully. There is a sluice gate that is part of the aging infrastructure from the channel open into the lower section of the gully allowing water to flow east towards the neighbours. This gate could be repaired and closed to capture the water of rainfall events and direct it into the channel towards Old Plum Block and Picnic Gully. Gate systems or pipes will need to be reopened or created into the desired areas for watering. Some selective repair of the



channel could also be undertaken to improve water holding for both transport and storage to increase its flexibility.

The management of the gully itself will be a key feature of this project. Water flows through this location quickly and this can lead to erosion, as well as loss of water that cannot be captured in extreme rainfall events. Slowing water down is key in this part of the farm. Introducing leaky weirs will suit this location. A leaky weir is essentially a permeable obstruction constructed across the water flow to slow down, but not stop, the progress of the water. The approach takes the energy out of the water movement, allows the dropping of soil and detritus out of the water flow, increasing water infiltration into the soil profile, and reduces scouring and erosion. They can be as simple or as elaborate as the budget and inclination allow, with some locations needing more help than others. Simple examples include logs and branches dragged into gullies or hay bales staked across the flow followed up by plantings. Some examples of construction can be found at the references below.<sup>7</sup> Natural processes have already started to create these leaky weirs, with dense recruitment of arum lily in some locations slowing water movement in the gully. The leaky weir locations will also be prime sites for fodder tree production as outlined in the previous priority action.

#### *Who?*

This will need to be a collaborative effort between all who benefit from the repurpose of the channel.

#### *When?*

Initial repairs to gates for directing water movement could be completed over the next three months. The higher rainfall period after Autumn break will allow assessment of water holding and directing, guiding the next steps for the repair works for next Summer.

#### *Milestones*

Note – the milestones outlined below may need to be repeated for a number of seasons to achieve the desired outcome for the channel. It should be expected that, given the age and state of the infrastructure that ongoing repairs will be required to maintain functionality.



#### *#8 Access track*

##### *Why?*

Carpet Rock block, in the southwestern corner of the property, does not currently have an all-weather access track. This location also offers possibilities for housing construction with some old quarry shedding on the block which could be refitted as a small hamlet, or alternatively, new accommodation could be built if the resources were available.

<sup>7</sup> <https://everydayfutures.nma.gov.au/project/leaky-weir/>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFk1cFWnVOM>

There are three options for a track to be constructed to this block – along the southern boundary from Danns Rd, a dog leg off the existing driveway past the Apple Block or from Picnic Gully Rd through the adjacent Harcourt mountain bike park and east of the large irrigation dam. The last of the three would be the most difficult due to having to negotiate with Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), however, it is the most logical location from a design perspective. It follows the higher ground, reducing water logging issues and creates a circular driveway throughout the farm offering two entries and exits – the existing from Danns rd and a new entrance on Picnic Gully Rd. It would also create an alternate access from the west into the farm building complex and homestead.

Having alternate access to the property supports greater resilience in the face of extreme weather, both high rainfall and bushfire, although the new access will be through a bushland area. It will also create an access directly to the Carpet Rock block, allowing independence of the property should a residence be built.

#### *How?*

The access and construction of this track will be a considerable expense and, given it is potentially offering access to a residence/s, it will need to be constructed and maintained to CFA standards (See Appendix Ten).

As the track is predominantly located in Crown land, the use will need to be negotiated with Parks Victoria. There is an existing track following the proposed access track for the farm, however it is in disrepair. An assessment will need to be made to present to project to Parks Victoria, including identification of any vegetation removal required.

#### *Who?*

Hugh is currently on the La Larr Ba Gauwa Park Management Committee and is best placed to commence these conversations with DEECA.

#### *When?*

This will depend on the collective's level of urgency to undertake these works and if there is funding available. If progressing this project is an immediate priority, initial contact could be instigated by Hugh via email in early 2024. This response will guide following actions. Keep in mind that the negotiations may take some time and that once permission is granted, there may be a limited time to act on the permit and commence construction.

#### *Milestones*



### Priority Actions Review and Evaluation

Much of this his action plan will be ongoing, however it is anticipated that the more discrete actions to be completed within the next 5-year period.

These priority actions will be reviewed annually for progress and relevance, with a comprehensive review of the overall Farm plan to be conducted in 2029.

### Conclusion

The HOFC has enormous potential to create a truly sustainable intensification of the Harcourt property with regeneration of soils, biodiversity enhancement, satisfying living and working conditions for farmers and real community connection being tangible outcomes alongside the production of wholesome, ethical food.

The approach is unconventional in the current Australian agricultural paradigm, and as such, the Cooperative is pioneering a new path. As with any innovative project, the going is not always easy. This plan outlines the current status of the Harcourt Organic Farm Cooperative and its vision for the future of the farm. It aims to provide day to day guidance to the group to assist with the navigation of this new way, as well as communicate their approach to newcomers – either to the HOFC itself or those interested in trying a similar path for themselves.

## Appendices (Maps in separate files)